

# Putting Safety First:

a briefing note on damp and mould for social housing practitioners



## Introduction

The fundamental role of social landlords is to provide tenants with safe homes to live in. This includes effectively and promptly resolving issues in homes which pose a danger to health and wellbeing, including damp and/ or mould. If damp and mould are left untreated for long periods, health problems can be serious or, in extreme cases, fatal. Most social homes in Scotland are of good quality: almost nine out of ten tenants say they are happy with the homes and services their landlord provides.<sup>1</sup> But where issues with damp or mould do arise, it is imperative that they are taken seriously. Landlords will want to make sure they understand the prevalence of these issues across their stock and take steps to resolve the root cause of the problem and prevent it occurring again as far as possible. This guide provides an overview for practitioners and landlords about how to deal with damp and mould in a way which is proactive, understanding of tenants' experiences, and most importantly effective in resolving the underlying issue. We have included case studies throughout to provide examples of effective approaches in practice.

This is the first of two briefing papers produced by ALACHO, Chartered Institute of Housing Scotland, SFHA (the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations) and the Scottish Housing Regulator. This paper focuses on advice for housing practitioners, while the next paper will focus on advice for boards and committee. To note while this paper refers to 'damp and mould' throughout we recognise they are not the same and that there can be various types of damp, not all of which lead to mould. However, given the common usage of damp and mould as a well understood term we have used this phrasing throughout to refer to either.

## What is damp and mould?

The root cause of damp or mould in properties can vary and in some complex cases there may be multiple causes. For example, penetrating damp can result from issues with the building leading to water ingress such as leaking pipes, cracks which allow rain in and blocked guttering. Rising damp can also arise from defects in the foundation. Both penetrating and rising damp are already included as criteria within the Tolerable Standard.<sup>2</sup>

Condensation damp can arise when a combination of excess moisture in the air and poor ventilation cause water droplets to form on cold surfaces such as windows and walls. Daily living activities such as bathing, cooking and drying clothes can increase the humidity of the air, and where properties are inadequately heated and ventilated, the risk of condensation forming is increased. This can lead to damp patches on walls, ceilings and other cold surfaces which in turn create the conditions for mould to form. Mould can also arise in areas with poor air circulation including behind furniture and inside wardrobes.

Regardless of the source, mould spores can pose a danger to health, particularly to children, older people and people with existing skin and respiratory conditions or a weaker immune system. It can cause respiratory problems, trigger asthma attacks and allergies, and make it more likely that people will suffer from infections<sup>3</sup> and have an impact on mental wellbeing. Where symptoms develop or are exacerbated by the presence of damp and mould, tenants should be encouraged to contact their GP to seek appropriate medical care. While condensation is linked to daily activities - such as bathing, cooking and drying clothes - which produce moisture, tenants should be able to complete these activities without being blamed for damp and mould developing. As the Housing Ombudsman in England has noted, homes should be fit for modern living.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Scottish Housing Regulator, [National Report on the Scottish Social Housing Charter](#), 2022

<sup>2</sup> [Tolerable Standard - mygov.scot](#)

<sup>3</sup> [NHS website- accessed 25/01/23](#)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Spotlight-report-Damp-and-mould-final.pdf>

## Assurance

The Scottish Housing Regulator places a critical importance on tenant and resident safety as part of the work of social landlords in Scotland. And the Scottish Housing Quality Standard developed by the Scottish Government requires that the homes provided by social landlords:

- Meet the Tolerable Standard;
- Are free from serious disrepair;
- Are energy efficient
- Have modern facilities and services; and
- Are healthy, safe and secure

It is therefore important that RSL governing bodies and local authority housing committees have a good level of assurance about how their organisation is managing damp and mould issues. SHR wrote to all landlords in December 2022 to ask all governing bodies and committees to consider the systems they have in place to ensure that their homes are not affected by mould and dampness and that they have appropriate and proactive systems to identify and deal with any reported cases of mould and damp timeously and effectively.

This advice and the forthcoming paper for governing bodies and committees is intended to support landlords ensure they have the appropriate systems to provide that assurance. SFHA will also begin a review of its Self-Assurance Toolkit in April which will look at the sort of questions governing body members should be asking their staff to gain assurance on tenant and resident safety. The toolkit, which has been developed in conjunction with the SHR, is available to all social landlords.

## Taking a professional approach

Responding to damp and mould primarily or initially as a lifestyle problem is inappropriate and ineffective. Taking this approach creates a negative impression with tenants who may feel blamed and stigmatised, and potentially less inclined to report further instances of the problem, creating more areas of 'silence' and long-term deterioration of the property. Indeed, previous research has shown the risk of condensation in Scottish homes is partly due to poor weather, which limits opportunity for exterior drying of clothing, while ventilation provision is often insufficient to cope with "lengthy moisture injections in living spaces".<sup>5</sup>

Damp and mould issues are best resolved when harnessing the expertise of asset/ repairs and housing managers, together with tenants who have the experience of living in the home to agree the right solutions. Where possible, landlords should ensure that processes to tackle condensation and related damp and mould involve support from other teams within the organisation or externally to support tenants, for example, to help maximise household income levels. This also requires a referral process to work effectively to bring teams around the person, rather than the tenant having to report the same issue repeatedly. CIH's professional standards framework<sup>6</sup> can play a role reinforcing the importance of all housing staff taking the initiative to ensure that damp and mould cases are identified and resolved. Landlords should ensure that they support staff to do this through training and effective internal procedures.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.homelaundrystudy.net/MEARU%20Laundry%20Design%20Guide.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cih.org/professional-standards>

## Identifying the problem

The first step in dealing with damp and mould is identifying where and why it has developed.

### Be proactive

The best way for landlords to prevent problems with damp and mould developing and potentially harming tenants' wellbeing is to take a proactive approach to identifying any issues across their stock. Landlords should draw insight from as many sources as possible to identify instances of damp and mould and the causes. This may involve looking beyond stock condition or stock investment surveys as a sole mechanism for identifying issues not reported by tenants. For example, as part of an annual home visit programme, landlords can check for damp and mould in all rooms and it is a good opportunity to talk to tenants and ask about any specific concerns they may have.

Landlords have an important opportunity to assess the condition of their homes when they become void. Specifically:

1. Damp and mould issues should be treated and resolved before reletting the property
2. The void assessment checklist should include steps like checking that extractor fans and check ventilation systems are working effectively as this will help to prevent the build-up of excess moisture in the property.

Other preventative measures should be built into planned maintenance work, such as gutter cleaning.

### Encourage tenants to raise concerns

Alongside proactive work from staff, landlords should encourage their tenants to report problems as soon as possible. Landlords should share information with tenants explaining the risks of living in a home with damp and mould, how to identify and report these issues, what steps the landlord will take when reported and when it will be completed. Landlords must have a simple way for tenants to report damp and mould problems and to complain if they are not satisfied with the response. Landlords should also ensure their communications reach as many tenants as possible. Complaint procedures should be clearly explained to tenants and details for the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman should be added in tenant communications. This will require a combination of a range of communication methods, such as: emails/ texts directly to tenants; leaflets and resident newsletters; information at community events or drop-in sessions, videos on digital channels such as that developed by the G8 group of RSLs joint communications team<sup>7</sup>; and social media as well as translation services where required.

However, a significant barrier can be lack of trust; if tenants have reported issues or experienced delays in repairs previously, they may not trust that any future problems they report will be dealt with effectively. In such cases landlords can only rebuild trust by delivering a good service and resolving issues like damp and mould quickly and effectively. We know that most landlords provide a good repairs service, with 88% of social tenants reporting that they are satisfied with their repairs service: but landlords should not be complacent.<sup>8</sup> It can be helpful to involve independent consultants or surveyors to provide further assurance to tenants that the diagnosis and repair work will address the cause and symptoms of damp and mould.

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<sup>7</sup> [Protecting your home against Condensation \(cvha.org.uk\)](https://www.cvha.org.uk)

<sup>8</sup> Scottish Housing Regulator, [National Report on the Scottish Social Housing Charter](#), 2022

## Case Study: East Dunbartonshire Council and Steri Systems

After a tenant complained of mould growth throughout the property and children feeling unwell, lethargic, skin conditions etc an investigation was carried out by the external mould and condensation contractor, Steri-Systems. They put together an action plan based on their findings at the property and the sample results from the laboratory tests.

A terminal clean of the property was carried out to neutralise and clean the spores and bacteria and the tenant was given advice on living conditions, drying clothes, opening trickle vents, heating etc. and provided with an information booklet.

An indoor air quality monitoring unit was installed in the property to check humidity and CO2 levels, this was then monitored for the following month by Steri who kept in touch with the tenant during that month if any levels increased. The highest level recorded was 78%, with humidity levels over 60% being of concern

The report at the end of the first month provided data in graphs, which showed the times that the humidity levels were high enough to cause further mould growth. This gave a clear picture of what was happening within the property.

In the second month, a positive input ventilation system was installed as well as two constant running automatic extraction units, to try and bring down the level of humidity.

With the above in place the third monthly monitoring report showed significant reduction in humidity and CO2 levels and the tenant reported a marked improvement in the children's general health as well as skin conditions.

Further monitoring from Steri showed continued improvement in humidity levels with levels sitting between 56 - 60% and no further mould growth within this property has been reported.

## Training for staff

All housing professionals should understand the significance of damp and mould issues. Good practice from across multiple landlords suggests that two types of training are beneficial:

- General awareness-raising training for all staff: all staff, particularly those who may enter tenants' homes or respond to repair requests, should be trained to identify damp and mould and understand the organisation's policies and processes for responding to it.
- Specific, technical training for staff dealing with damp and mould: staff who will respond to reports of damp and mould must be trained and appropriately equipped to assess the issue (including use of PPE), identify the root cause, and respond appropriately.

## How to respond

Landlords should respond to instances of damp and mould promptly, with compassion for the impact on tenants' wellbeing, and with a focus on dealing with the issue and preventing it from reoccurring.

Issues of damp and mould are often multi-layered and solutions can include both tackling the problems with the property and supporting tenants with any issues that may affect the experience of living in that home, particularly with the rising cost of energy and other living costs. We are increasingly hearing that tenants are reducing their use of ventilation and heating systems, given the energy crisis and the rising costs of heating their homes. Support can be available to provide cash and fuel vouchers to tenants to help address these problems: see **further information** section for details.

Successful policies and procedures should enable landlords to address both damp and mould. Policies need to be accessible to tenants and written so that the message is clear, does not attribute blame to the tenant and how they live, but encourages landlords and tenants to work together to improve the condition of the home and the experience of living there. Landlords must clearly explain how they will approach the issue, and what actions will be taken when to treat the problem. Tenants must have a clear, easy method for reporting a reoccurrence of damp and mould following treatments.

### Case study: Changeworks' Net Zero Pathways service

Changeworks is working with Glen Housing Association providing valuable data analysis and strategic support to develop a net zero, decarbonisation strategy across their housing stock. This includes looking at ways to treat the cause, rather than the symptoms of mould and damp as part of an energy efficient retrofit project which also prioritises the health and wellbeing of tenants.

The Net Zero Pathways service encompasses tailored solutions and end-to-end project management including monitoring and evaluation. The project considers the interaction between insulation, airtightness, ventilation, and tenant behaviour in buildings and a phased plan for installation of the measures is developed by knowledgeable professionals.

The service also provides tenant engagement to ensure tenants feel informed, supported and engaged in the decision making.

To find out more about how Changeworks' Net Zero Pathways service email [workwithus@changeworks.org.uk](mailto:workwithus@changeworks.org.uk)

### Focus on the root cause

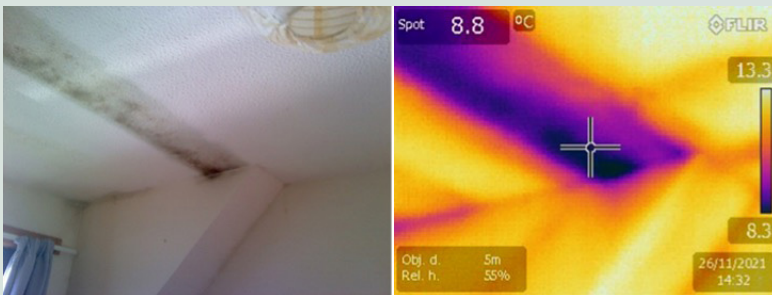
The aim of all responses to damp and mould issues must be to tackle the root cause of the problem. Staff or contractors sent in to respond to damp and mould should be trained to identify the root cause, particularly whether any issues with the building are contributing e.g. defective or inadequate ventilation, leaks or water ingress, or insufficient/defective insulation. They should have the equipment necessary to assess the scale of the problem. It is good practice, particularly where building issues have contributed to the development of damp and mould, to also assess whether neighbouring homes have any issues with damp and mould. It is not appropriate to blame tenants for damp and mould, citing 'lifestyle issues' as the reason behind problems with condensation. Good practices help to prevent condensation, but some tenants have reported frustration at being told to open windows in the middle of winter, dry clothes outside without any private drying space, or to change their cooking or bathing habits with little consideration for the circumstances of their household. Daily living activities can increase the risk of condensation, but tenants, wherever they live and whatever type of house they live in, are entitled to live in a home free of damp and mould. Landlords can share information with tenants to limit the build-up of excess moisture, but this should happen alongside active work to the property, where required, to remove existing damp and mould and prevent its reoccurrence.

## Case study: Lochalsh and Skye Housing Association

Lochalsh and Skye Housing Association offer an in-house Energy Advice Service to tenants (and the wider community), adopting an 'Energy Carer' approach where the housing association aims to work in partnership with the tenants to explore and understand the five key elements: fabric, ventilation, heating, people and tariff that impact on successful comfort outcomes. This involves systematically gathering real-world data through meter readings and regular stock surveys, and in more challenging humidity management cases carrying out programmes of whole house room temperature and relative humidity monitoring.

The energy advisors have a detailed knowledge about the energy consumption trends of their tenants and can provide an in-depth investigation of problems alongside individually tailored advice to help address these. Where an issue with dampness is reported, monitoring equipment is installed to measure the internal property conditions and energy usage over a few weeks. Combined with a thermal imaging camera, the advisor can then provide a visual presentation of the issues using graphs of the measured data to demonstrate a build-up of moisture in particular rooms at a particular time of day. Key to this process is a friendly approach coupled with simple presentation of information (e.g. using visual prompts such as images and graphs) and taking the time to understand individual circumstances and preferences. Resolving humidity management and mould issues relies on partnerships between landlord and tenant - neither party can fix the issue separately.

The lessons from survey and monitoring, helps inform the housing association's policy and decisions around appropriate heating and ventilation solutions.



## Technology

Technology can help to identify, tackle, and prevent damp and mould issues. Some of this is not new - such as dehumidifiers and ventilation systems which reduce the level of moisture in the air. For this technology it is important to consider the running costs for tenants. When providing such technology, landlords should opt for more energy efficient models wherever possible and explain to tenants in clear terms how much they will cost to run a week and how to operate them effectively.

Landlords can use smart sensors that can monitor air quality and moisture levels in properties which have had issues with damp and mould. These sensors can also alert the landlord if an excessive amount of moisture is detected so that it can be dealt with before damp and mould develop. Some systems also have an app which allows tenants to see when humidity levels spike, so they understand which actions contribute most to moisture build-up. When tenants are able to engage with this technology, it empowers them and involve them in the solutions for their homes. Although this technology may not be appropriate in all circumstances, using data from these sensors to drive decision making allows resources to be managed more effectively and allows responses to damp and mould to be more thorough and targeted. Data subscription charges apply for each sensor installed and landlords should be aware of this when considering installing these smart devices.

## Case study: The Healthier Homes Initiative

The Healthier Homes Initiative is a four phased project exploring the ways indoor environmental sensors can support better living environments for tenants. This initiative is managed by The Technology Enabled Care in housing (TECH) programme at SFHA, and is funded by Scottish Government to inform future strategic planning across the housing sector. Its focus is on environmental sensors and the indoor environment, specifically heat and humidity. Fife Council and Stirling Council along with Kingdom, Blackwood and Barrhead Housing Associations joined the Healthier Homes pathfinder collaborative and received training to assist them in designing and delivering tests of change for their organisations.

The five pathfinders are now implementing what they learned in the training, by installing sensors in properties and monitoring the data through an online dashboard. The dashboard provides real time alerts to the landlord and tenant on the condition of the indoor environment, highlighting when levels drop outwith optimal ranges. The sensors can alert housing associations and local authorities to early indications of damp, mould, and ventilation issues. This means that landlords can act far earlier to ensure a healthy environment for the tenant.

The final Healthier Homes report is due towards the end of 2023. For more information please contact Stephanie Elliot: [selliot@sfha.co.uk](mailto:selliot@sfha.co.uk)

## Follow up

To be sure that efforts to treat damp and mould have worked properly, initial treatments must be supplemented by a follow up visit to check whether the problem has truly been resolved. This should take place at least six weeks after the initial treatment, although any issues reported by tenants in the meantime should be responded to promptly. In some cases, it may not be possible to adapt the property to work for a specific household without damp and mould reoccurring. This is a function of our ageing housing stock- some older properties simply cannot be improved to meet modern living arrangements. In such cases, landlords should seek to rehouse the household in a more suitable property, with regular remedial and preventative work if a move cannot be arranged quickly. The landlord must then decide whether, with further works if needed, that property might work for another (typically smaller) household, or whether it cannot safely be re-let.



## Data management

It will only be possible to take an informed, proactive, and risk-based approach to dealing with damp and mould cases if landlords have the right information collected, stored and accessible to all relevant staff.

### Record keeping

Staff can't act on information they don't have. An effective response to damp and mould cases, particularly where the problem is complex or persistent, will require knowledge of the property, the resident and historic repairs work. This means all relevant information about properties and tenants must be recorded along with all actions taken by staff and concerns raised by tenants or third parties. Landlords must ensure they have systems in place which enable good record keeping.

Ideally all this information will be stored in one place, which allows staff to easily access and interpret key information to inform their decisions. This can be achieved through developing an electronic dashboard system which pulls together information in one place. However, we recognise that landlords may be using multiple IT systems for different areas of their business and that it can be costly and time consuming to replace these with one cohesive system. In that case, landlords must ensure staff understand where important information is stored and take steps to condense separate reporting systems wherever possible.

### Set the right targets

What gets measured gets done. All targets set for repairs and maintenance work, including responses to damp and mould, must be designed with effective end goals in mind. This means not just focusing on how quickly customer requests and complaints are responded to, although this is important, but also focusing on whether the problem was resolved and whether customers were satisfied with the work done. For damp and mould, a key focus of targets should be whether the issue reoccurred after the initial treatment.

### Risk-informed approach

It is important that landlords' proactive and reactive work on damp and mould is risk informed. For proactive work, this means gathering and using stock condition data to predict which properties are most likely to have issues with damp and mould. On a small scale, this would include checking neighbouring properties for damp and mould when problems have developed in a nearby home with similar characteristics. On a larger scale, landlords should consider installing preventative measures, such as mechanical ventilation systems or smart sensors, across their stock profile in property types they have identified as being particularly susceptible to damp and mould. When responding to damp and mould cases, staff should consider the personal characteristics of tenants and whether anybody would have an increased risk to their health from living with damp and mould. Young children, older and disabled people, and people with lung conditions, compromised immune systems and certain other health problems are at increased risk of illnesses resulting from damp and mould. Staff should consider the information they hold about households and ask about health conditions when tenants report issues with damp and mould. All instances of damp and mould should be responded to promptly, but additional priority should be given to cases where tenants are particularly at risk. In rare cases landlords may want to consider providing tenants with temporary accommodation while the causes of damp and mould are addressed and there would be significant disruption to tenants to rectify the problem.

## Case study - Warmworks: installing smart ventilation technology

As part of its delivery of Warmer Homes Scotland, Warmworks recently identified smart ventilation technology as a route to mitigating the risk of damp and mould caused by poor ventilation for properties, and then worked in partnership with the Scottish Government to introduce it as a measure on the scheme.

After surveyors consistently identified that poor ventilation was especially prevalent in pre-1919 properties where air tightness was expected to increase as a result of the fabric measures to be installed, steps were taken to introduce smart ventilation technology into properties.

The system is centred on smart ventilation bricks, which are designed to reduce draughts and heat loss, prevent damp and mould, improve thermal comfort and reduce energy consumption. It works by using local weather and air quality data, along with sensors and smart algorithms, to open and close the air bricks to effectively regulate air flow in the property.

A pilot tested this technology across a group of 34 properties, which resulted in a number of outcomes:

- An average SAP improvement of 2-3 points per property
- Customers reported improved comfort and warmth through reduced draughts
- Customers have found the product straightforward and low maintenance, commenting on the guidance being easy to follow
- The supply chain of local installers found that the technology was simple to install and backed by good product support from Warmworks and the manufacturer.

For more information please contact [jenny.langskog@warmworks.co.uk](mailto:jenny.langskog@warmworks.co.uk)

## Responding to complaints and disrepair claims

### Complaints

Complaints processes must be easy for tenants to understand, access and use. Landlords should share how tenants can complain and what steps they can take if they are not happy with the result of a complaint. Good data management is critical to effectively dealing with complaints. Landlords should be able to evidence the actions taken, including steps to check whether treatments were successful, and how long it took to respond to requests and complaints.

### Learning from complaints

Landlords must ensure that they learn from complaints, and other sources of resident feedback, to continually improve their performance. This is particularly important for issues like damp and mould where problems are likely to reappear if not appropriately resolved. Landlords must ensure they have a rolling process to review complaints, assess what went wrong, and as a result make changes where needed to policies, procedures, and staff behaviour.

## Taking a holistic view

Cases of damp and mould should not be treated in isolation. Landlords should recognise how issues from other types of work to properties can lead to problems with damp and mould, and how other areas of work can help to reduce the chance of issues developing in the first place.

### Energy efficiency and building safety works

Poor quality energy efficiency or building safety remediation works can create the conditions for damp and mould to develop. Retrofit works must consider indoor air quality alongside heat retention, otherwise they may reduce the level of ventilation and make it more difficult for moisture to escape. Risks can also arise where thermal bridges are created due to gaps in insulation which lead to cold spots in the building fabric. More broadly, poorly insulated and energy inefficient homes are more likely to be cold and create conditions in which damp and mould can develop. Landlords may benefit from identifying their least efficient homes and planning additional proactive work to monitor for and prevent damp and mould.

## Conclusions

This guide sets out the importance of taking a proactive, customer-focused approach to dealing with damp and mould. Key elements of an effective approach include:

1. Undertake proactive assessments of stock condition, taking a data-informed, risk-based approach to prioritise focus on properties particularly susceptible to damp and mould.
2. Train all staff to identify and respond to damp and mould – see every home visit as an opportunity to identify issues.
3. Encourage tenants to report damp and mould – share communications on the risks of living with damp and mould and make sure tenants have clear, simple methods of reporting relevant issues.
4. Respond promptly to reports of damp and mould.
5. Undertake an assessment of the property to identify the root cause of the issue – staff must be adequately trained and have the correct equipment for this.
6. Treat the problem – the response will vary depending on severity, but always focus on resolving the root cause. This can include giving tenants sensitive advice on how to minimise the build up of excess moisture and reduce the risk of condensation, without blaming the issue on lifestyle factors.
7. Follow up – check that steps taken have resolved the issue. If not, take further action until the issue is resolved.
8. Record all actions taken and ensure this data can be linked through to other information about the property, the household and previous repair works.
9. If the case escalates to a complaint or disrepair claim, continue taking all possible steps to resolve the issue.
10. Learn from past cases – improve processes where needed and consider which property types may need further proactive work to prevent damp and mould. Throughout all stages there must be clear, prompt communication with tenants, a focus on skills and professionalism, and a customer focused organisational culture

## Further information

- CIH resources on damp and mould, <https://www.cih.org/policy/tackling-damp-and-mould>
- CIH training on damp and mould, <https://www.cih.org/education/training/tackling-damp-mould-and-condensation>
- Housing Ombudsman Service: Lifestyle, 2021, <https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Spotlight-report-Damp-and-mould-final.pdf>
- SFHA Building Safety and Maintenance Forum -Contact [cdove@sfha.co.uk](mailto:cdove@sfha.co.uk)
- SFHA Self-Assurance Toolkit - <https://www.sfha.co.uk/our-work/policy-category/governance-and-regulation/sub-category/governance/policy-article/covid-19-supplemental-guidance-to-sfha-self-assurance-toolkit-now-available>
- The Scottish Government Fuel Support Fund and Winter Hardship - Food Insecurity Fund, contact [enquiries@sfha.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@sfha.co.uk)
- SPICe, Dampness in Scottish Social Housing <https://spice-spotlight.scot/2022/12/05/dampness-in-scottish-social-housing>

